V

LAW OF *KAMMA*

CONTENTS

1. The Five Universal Laws

In Buddhism, there are 5 universal orders or laws (*Niyamas*) that operate in the physical and mental realms. They are:

a) ***Utu Niyama***: the **caloric** or physical inorganic order, e.g., seasonal changes of weather, nature of heat, energy, chemical reactions, etc.

b) ***Bija Niyama***: **germinal** or physical organic order, e.g., rice from rice seeds, sweet taste of sugar, different ways of plant propagation, etc.

c) ***Kamma Niyama*: moral** or cause and effect order. Moral and immoral acts produce desirable and undesirable results.

d) ***Citta Niyama*:** order of mind or **psychic** law, e.g., processes of consciousness, power of mind, telepathy, mind reading, recollection of past lives, divine eye, psychic power, etc.

e) ***Dhamma Niyama***: order of the **norm**, e.g., the natural phenomena occurring at the advent of a *Bodhisatta* in his last birth, gravitation and other similar laws of nature.

Every mental and physical phenomenon can be explained by these all-embracing 5 orders that are laws in themselves. ***Kamma*** as such is only one of these 5 orders that demand no giver, nor enforcer, as is the case with all natural laws.

2. The Importance of Understanding the Law of *Kamma*

The **Law of *Kamma*** is a fundamental doctrine in Buddhism. Although this belief was prevalent in India before the advent of the Buddha, it was the Buddha who explained and formulated this doctrine in its complete form, which we have today.

Puzzled by the seemingly inexplicable, apparent disparity that existed among humanity, the young **Brahmin Subha** approached the Buddha and asked him to explain the reason for the **cause of inequality**: "What is the cause and condition why human beings are seen to be inferior and superior? For people are seen to be short-lived and long-lived, sickly and healthy, ugly and beautiful, un-influential and influential, poor and wealthy, lowborn and highborn, stupid and wise."

The Buddha's reply was:
"All living beings are **owners** of their actions (*kammasaka*), **heirs** of their actions (*kammadayada*); they **originate** from their actions (*kammayoni*), are **related** to their actions (*kammabandhu*), have their actions as their **refuge** (*kammapatisarana*). It is action (*kamma*) that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior." (*Majjhima Nikaya Sutta* No. 135, *Culakammavibhanga Sutta*)

The **Expositor (**p 87)**,** a commentary of the *Abhidhamma* elaborates: "Depending on the **difference in *kamma*** appear the differences in the destiny of being without legs, with two legs, four legs, many legs, with perception, without perception, with neither perception nor non-perception. Depending on the difference in *kamma* appear the differences in the **birth** of beings, high and low, base and exalted, happy and miserable. Depending on the difference in *kamma* appears the difference in the **individual features** of beings as beautiful and ugly, highborn or lowborn, well built or deformed. Depending on the difference in kamma appears the difference in **worldly conditions** of beings, such as gain and loss, fame and disgrace, blame and praise, happiness and misery."

Thus, from the Buddhist standpoint, our present mental, moral intellectual and temperamental differences are, for the most part, due to our own actions and tendencies, both **past and present**. Although Buddhism attributes this variation to *kamma,* as being the chief cause among a variety, it does not, however, assert that everything is due to *kamma.* The Law of *Kamma,* important as it is, is only one of the twenty-four conditions described in the *Patthana* or Conditional Relations, one of the treatises in the *Abhidhamma*.

3. What is *Kamma*?

The Pali term ***kamma*** (Sanskrit: *karma*) literally means action or doing. Any kind of **volitional or intentional action** whether mental, verbal or physical is regarded as *kamma*. It covers all that is included in the phrase: **'thought, word or deed'.** Generally speaking, all good and bad actions constitute *kamma*. In its ultimate sense, *kamma* means all **moral and immoral volition** (*kusala- akusala cetana*).

In *Anguttara iii, 415*, the Buddha says: *"I declare, O Bhikkhus, that cetana* (volition) *is kamma. Having willed one acts by body, speech, and thought."* (Refer to **Note 1** for an explanation of *cetana*).

Involuntary, unintentional or unconscious actions, though technically deeds, do not constitute *kamma*, because volition, the most important factor in determining *kamma*, is absent. Without volition, **a deed is sterile**; it produces no reaction of moral significance. ***Kamma*** is not fate nor is it predestination, imposed on us by some mysterious unknown power controlling our lives. It is one's own doing that reacts on one's own self, and so it is possible to divert the course of our *kamma* to some extent. How far one diverts it will depend on one-self. So we have a certain amount of free will. The past influences the present but does not dominate it for *kamma* is both **past and present deeds**.

4. How does the Law of *Kamma* Operate?

***Kamma* is action and *vipaka*, fruit or result is its reaction**. *Kamma* is the cause and *vipaka* is the effect. According to the Law of *Kamma*, every volitional activity is accompanied by its due effect.

The *Samyutta Nikaya* I, 227 states:
According to the seed that's sown, so is the fruit ye reap therefrom.
Doer of good will gather good, Doer of evil, evil reaps.
Sown is the seed, and thou shall taste the fruit thereof.

Kamma is a law in itself that operates in its own field without the intervention of an external independent ruling agency. The Law of *Kamma* acts in the following manner.

a) All immoral actions give immoral resultants. There are ten immoral actions, namely: bodily action of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct; verbal action of lying, slandering, harsh speech, frivolous chatter; mental action of greed, ill-will and delusion.

b) All moral actions give moral resultants. Abstention of the ten immoral actions listed above, constitute moral action. In addition there are also ten bases of meritorious action, namely: charity, morality, mind culture, reverence, service, transference of merits, rejoicing in others' merits, teaching the *Dhamma*, listening to the *Dhamma* and forming right views. (Chapter XI)

c) A person does moral/immoral actions and he gets moral/immoral resultants. It is not possible for one person to perform moral/immoral actions and another person to receive the moral/immoral results.

d) In judging each moral or immoral action, we consider these four '**fields of *kamma***', namely: 1) as one's own act, 2) as instigating another, 3) as consenting to another's instigation, and 4) as commending the act.

5. What is the Cause of *Kamma*?

Ignorance (*avijja*) or 'not knowing things as they truly are' is the chief cause of *kamma*. "**Dependent on Ignorance arise Volitional Activities** (*sankhara*)" states the Buddha in *Paticca Samuppada* or Dependent Origination. Associated with ignorance is its ally **craving *(tanha)*,** another root cause of *kamma*. Unwholesome actions are conditioned by these two causes.

All good deeds of a world-ling, though associated with the three wholesome roots of generosity, loving-kindness and knowledge are nevertheless regarded as *kamma* because the two unwholesome roots of ignorance and craving are dormant in them. No *kamma* is accumulated by one who has eradicated craving and has understood 'things as they truly are'.

Buddhas and *Arahants* do not accumulate fresh *kamma* as they have eradicated ignorance and craving, the root causes of *kamma.* "They have destroyed the germ, their desires no longer grow." (*Te khina bija*, *avirulhicchanda.* – Stanza 14, *Ratana Sutta*). Although volition is present whenever there is bodily, verbal or mental action, in the case of an *Arahant*, that volition is not accompanied by craving at the end of each impulsive moment, and it completely disappears without leaving any trace and without transforming it into *kamma.* Hence there is no rebirth for the *Arahant*. However, they will still receive the results of their past *kamma*.

6. Who is the Doer of *Kamma*? Who Reaps the *Vipaka*?

The answer is given in the ***Visuddhi Magga*** (Path of Purification).

> "*No doer is there who does the deed.*
> *Nor is there one who feels the fruit*."

According to Buddhism, there are two types of truth – conventional truth and absolute truth. For conventional purposes, we use such terms as man, woman, animal, being, self and so forth. In reality, there is no unchanging entity or any being in the form of a man, woman, animal or anything permanent that can be called a self. The so-called fleeting form consists only of **mental and material processes** that are **constantly changing**, not remaining the same for two consecutive moments. This so-called being is a combination of five Aggregates (*khandas*) that are the aggregates of Matter, Feeling, Perception, Mental Formations and Consciousness. There is no doer apart from the action, no thinker apart from the thought. Who then is the doer of *kamma*? Who feels the effect?

> ***Volition or intention (cetana) is itself the doer.***
> ***Feeling (vedana) feels the fruit or effect.***

Apart from these mental processes, there is none to sow and none to reap. So *kamma* is not an accretion of the self or soul since there is no permanent self or soul to begin with.

7. Where is all the *Kamma* Stored?

An action (*kamma*) once performed, is finished as far as its performance is concerned. It is also irreversible. What remains of the action is its **potential,** the inevitability of its result (*vipaka*). Even within a lifetime, a person has performed a lot of actions, either moral or immoral. So he must have accumulated a lot *kamma.* Where is all this *kamma* stored? In answer to this question by King Milinda, the Ven. Nagasena replied:

"Kamma is not stored somewhere in this fleeting consciousness nor in any part of the body. But dependent on mind and body, it rests, manifesting itself at the opportune moment, just as mangoes are not said to be stored somewhere in the mango tree, but dependent on the mango tree they lie, springing up in due season".

In the same way, fire is not stored in a match but under the right conditions of friction, the match will produce fire. *Kamma* is an individual potential that is transmitted from one existence to another.

8. Classification of *Kamma*

Kamma is classified four-fold according to its function, priority of effect, time of taking effect and the plane where the effects take place.

a) **Function**

There are four classes of *kamma* according to function. Every birth is conditioned by past good or bad *kamma*, which predominates at the moment of death. The *kamma* that conditions future birth is called **Reproductive** *kamma.* Now another *kamma* may intervene to assist and maintain or to weaken and obstruct the fruition of the Reproductive *kamma*. Such actions are called **Supportive** or **Obstuctive** *kamma* respectively.

According to the Law of *Kamma,* the potential energy of the Reproductive *kamma* may be totally annulled by a more powerful opposing past *kamma*, which seeking an opportunity may quite unexpectedly operate, just as a counteractive force can obstruct the path of a flying arrow and bring it to the ground. Such an action is called **Destructive** *kamma*, which is more powerful than the other two in that it not only obstructs but also destroys the whole force.

b) **Priority of Effect**

First is ***Garuka*** **or Weighty** *kamma*, which produces its effect in this life or the next for certain. Among the weighty or serious actions, the moral ones are the *Jhanas* or Mental Absorptions while the immoral ones are the five immediately effective heinous crimes, namely: matricide, patricide, murder of an *Arahant*, wounding of a Buddha and creating a schism in the *Sangha* or Monastic Order.

In the absence of a Weighty *kamma* to condition the next birth, a **Death Proximate** *kamma* may operate. This is the action one does or recollects immediately before the dying moment. Owing to its significance in determining the future birth, the custom of reminding the dying person of his good deeds and making him perform wholesome actions still prevails in Buddhist countries.

Habitual *kamma* is next in priority of effect. It is the action one constantly performs and recollects and which one has great liking.

The last is **Cumulative** *kamma* that embraces all that cannot be included in the above three. This is, as it were, the reserve fund of a particular being.

c) **Time of Taking Effect**

There are moral and immoral actions that produce their effects in this very life or in a subsequent life or in any life in the course of one's wandering in *Samsara.* These actions are **Immediately** Effective, **Subsequently** Effective and **Indefinitely** Effective *kamma.* When such actions that should produce their effects in this life or subsequent lives do not operate, they are termed **Ineffective.**

d) **Plane where Effects Take Place**

The last classification is according to the plane in which the effects take place, namely:

i) **Immoral actions** that ripen in the Sensual Plane (*Kamaloka*) of misery, namely: hell, animal, ghost and demon realms.

ii) **Moral actions** that ripen in the Sensual Plane (*Kamaloka*) of happiness, namely the human and the six celestial realms. In *Abhidhamma*, they are the eight types of wholesome consciousness (***sobhana citta***) pertaining to the Sensual Sphere. (Refer to Chapter XI, 2)

iii) **Moral actions** that ripen in the Form Plane (*Rupaloka*) of *Brahmas* with form. They are the *rupa-jhanas*, namely: the first, second, third and fourth *jhana*.

iv) **Moral actions** that ripen in the Formless Plane (*Arupaloka*) of *Brahmas* possessing mind only but without form. They are the *arupa-jhanas*, namely: Realm of Infinite Space, Realm of Infinite Consciousness, Realm of Nothingness, and Realm of Neither Perception nor Non-Perception.

9. Is One Bound to Reap All That One Has Sown in Just Proportion?

While the Law of *Kamma* states that we reap what we sow, there is another aspect of *kamma* that is also very important, namely, that ***kamma*-results can be modified**. This means that the Law of *Kamma* does not operate with mechanical rigidity but allows for modifications in the ripening of the fruit. It is this dynamic aspect of *kamma* that the Buddha declared in *Anguttarra* I, 249 as follows:

"If anyone says that a man must reap everything according to his deeds, in this case there is no religious life, nor is there an opportunity afforded for the entire extinction of sorrow".

"But if anyone says that what a man reaps accords with his deeds, in that case there is a religious life, and an opportunity is afforded for the entire extinction of sorrow".

These statements by the Buddha tell us that *kamma* is **not fate or predestination**. Nor is one bound to reap all that one has sown in just proportion. We can explain this by the simile of the billiard ball, whose direction can be changed or even stopped by sending another billiard ball to hit it at an appropriate angle. Like any physical event, the mental process constituting a *kammic* action does not exist in isolation. Thus its efficacy in producing a result depends not only on its own potential but also upon the potential of other *kammas*. We see for example, that a particular *kamma* either moral, or immoral, may sometimes have its result **strengthened** by supportive *kamma*, **weakened** by obstructive *kamma,* or even **annulled** by destructive *kamma*. The occurrence of the result can also be **delayed** if the condition for ripening is not complete; and that delay may again give chance for obstructive or destructive *kamma* to operate.

Besides **external conditions**, the **spiritual quality** of the mind from which the volition arises can affect the results. To one rich in moral or spiritual qualities, a single offence may not entail the weighty results the same offence will have for one who is poor in such protective virtues. The Buddha compares this with the taste of water

from a cup wherein a lump of salt has been added against the taste of water from the Ganges River in which the same lump of salt has been thrown in. Thus although Angulimala killed many people before he met the Buddha, and his action would have landed him in the woeful states in future existences, his attainment of *Arahantship* effectively closed the door to future rebirth and suffering, although he would still have to bear the dire consequences while he lived.

So complicated is the web of *kammic* conditioning that the Buddha declared *kamma*-result to be one of the **"four unthinkables",** that are beyond the range of thought and should not be speculated upon. But though the working of *kamma* is beyond our intellect, the important practical message is clear: the fact that ***kamma*-results are modifiable** frees man from the shackles of predestination and fatalism and keeps the road to liberation constantly open before him. Everyone has a certain amount of **free will** to mould one's life or modify one's actions. Even the most vicious person can become a virtuous person if he wants to change his life and makes the effort to do so. However, everything in this world, including man himself is subject to conditions and without the necessary conditions, nothing can arise.

10. Lessons Learnt from *Kamma*

The *kamma* doctrine of the Buddha is a teaching of moral and spiritual responsibility for oneself and others. The more we understand the Law of *Kamma*, the more we realize how careful we must act in thought, speech and deeds if we wish to accumulate wholesome *kamma*. For when a certain thought, speech or deed is performed regularly, there is a definite tendency to repeat the act. Thus each act, mental or physical tends to produce its like and be in turn produced, a condition called ***asevana*** or **habitual recurrence**. Wholesome actions performed regularly tend to increase the tendencies to goodness while unwholesome actions performed regularly tend to do the opposite. The advice given by the Buddha in the *Dhammapada* sums up the lessons to learnt from *kamma*.

Do not ***disregard evil lightly****, saying: "It will not come nigh unto me"; by the falling of drops even a water jar is filled; likewise the fool, gathering little by little, fills himself with evil. (Verse 121)*

Do not ***disregard merit,*** *saying: "It will not come nigh unto me"; by the falling of drops even a water jar is filled; likewise the wise man, gathering little by little, fills himself with good. (Verse 122)*

According to Venerable Ledi Sayadaw, by the declaration: "All living beings are **owners** of their actions, **heirs** of their actions; they **originate** from their actions, are **related** to their actions, have their actions as their **refuge**", the Buddha also meant that the wholesome and unwholesome actions performed once by a being during his lifetime, may ripen even after a lapse of thousands of existences or world cycles. The wholesome *kammas* that yield good results and unwholesome *kammas* that yield bad results always **accompany** the life-continuum of a being. Therefore one should always love and **esteem good conduct** more than one's own life by performing meritorious actions. On the other hand one should always **shun evil conduct** more than the danger of death and refrain from evil deeds.

11. References

1) The Buddhist Doctrine of *Kamma* and Rebirth by Venerable Narada Maha Thera. Reprinted by Selangor Buddhist Vipassana Meditation Society, Petaling Jaya Malaysia, 1994.
2) What *Kamma* Is. Sayadaw U Thittila, Department of Religious Affairs, Yangon, Myanmar, 1992.
3) The Expositor (*Attthasalini*) – Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the *Dhammasangani.* Translated by Pe Maung Tin and Mrs. Rhys Davids, Pali Texts Society, London 1976.
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12. Explanatory Notes

Note 1: There are fifty kinds of concomitants in ***Sankharakkhandha*** (Group of mental formations), and the relation between *cetana* and the remaining forty-nine concomitants may be explained by the following example: Suppose in a harbour there are forty-nine barges fully loaded with goods, and there is only one big steamer, which has to tow these forty-nine barges from one riverine port to another. Now the spectators on the bank of the river may say: "This steamer has towed such and such a barge and gone to the mid-stream and will call at such and such a port." Similarly, *cetana* sometimes drags *lobha* out and unfailingly drives it towards the object of greed. Sometimes it drags *dosa* out and unfailingly drives it towards the object of hatred. The cases of the remaining forty-nine concomitants of *Sankharakkhandha* may be considered likewise."

Cetana is also compared to a class monitor or a general. A class monitor prepares and studies his lessons and at the same time causes the junior pupils to prepare their lessons and study them. A general also fights the battle himself and causes his soldiers to fight simultaneously.

In his *Ahara Dipani* (Manual of Nutriment) Venerable Mahathera Ledi Sayadaw elaborately expounded the **immense power of *cetana*** as follows: "The *dhamma* which **incessantly urges or causes** the mind and its associate concomitants to become restless and chase various kinds of objects is called *cetana.* Try to discern that mind is restless and ever fleeting. When one encounters an object of *lobha* (greed), it is *cetana*, which drags that *lobha* out and invariably directs it towards the object of greed. It also urges or causes one to enjoy sensuous pleasures. Similar processes take place in the cases of *dosa* (hatred) and *moha* (delusion)."

"Worldlings naturally possess very little *cetana* in respect of *saddha* (faith). *panna* (wisdom), *dana* (almsgiving), *sila* (morality), and *bhavana* (mental concentration). As regards them it urges, drives or causes the mind in a weak manner and not very quickly. There has to be a lot of external means or support, such as reflecting on the dangers of arising in hells to arouse urgency or ***samvega***, and of the advantages of performing wholesome volitional actions for *cetana* to urge or drive the mind towards them, because mind delights in evil (*Dhammapada* 116). When *cetana* has to cause a person to go to a place where he desires to go very much, it acts very quickly; but if it has to cause him to go to a place where he does not like to go, it acts very slowly."